

A Gift of Liberation

Course Two—Why Are We Alive?

Class One: Why We Do Anything That We Do?

1) As we undertake our second course for Pabongka Rinpoche's *Gift of Liberation*, remember that we started at the end of this record of 24 days of teachings by the Lama. That is, we have completed the sections on meditation and emptiness first, so that we can apply these to the rest of our study and practice of the text. Now we begin to work through the steps of enlightenment from the first day of the teachings. What is the overwhelming theme of this first day, and how does it apply to our everyday life?

[At the very beginning of his teaching, Pabongka Rinpoche asks the crowd who has come to hear him to examine *why* they have come to the teaching. He then actually takes his listeners through a brilliant, concise review of all the steps to enlightenment he is about to teach, in order that we understand clearly why in fact we are here—why we are alive at all.

What we learn from this advice is that *we should pause before we undertake any action at all during every day of our entire life* and ask this same question: Why am I alive? Why am I about to do what I'm about to do? What is it that I hope to accomplish?

This then will be the theme throughout our entire course on the steps to enlightenment. We will learn to pause and ask ourselves this question, constantly; we will practice doing so during our meditation periods. In time this examination of ourselves will serve as the crucible in which we forge our very enlightenment.]

2) We know already from the first course that the title of the masterpiece we are studying is *A Gift of Liberation*. But now we get a chance to see the

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

extended title of the work, which is *The Essence of Nectar: Profound Advices, Complete and Utterly Unerring, which Thrust into Our Hands a Gift of Liberation—Personal Instructions which Include the Cream of All the High Words of the Buddha Himself; Notes Taken during Teachings which were Based upon the Lama’s Own Experience of the Steps of the Path to Enlightenment, the Cream of All that the Matchless King of the Dharma ever Thought, Deep within His Heart*. Please separate out the important elements of this title and say a few words about each.

[The first element would be “the essence of nectar.” Remember that the original Greek word *nectar* literally means *to pass (tar) beyond death (nec)*. And the corresponding Tibetan in the title also is a translation of the Sanskrit word *amirta*, or the *nectar of deathlessness*. The point is that this teaching is meant to do nothing less than to take us to an enlightenment where we ourselves are actually deathless, and are in a position to help all others achieve this state as well.

The word *advice* refers to the advices which we receive directly from our own Heart Teacher. These are *profound* because they are based on the concept of emptiness, which is what makes our liberation possible.

As we will see, an important feature of the traditional teachings on the steps of enlightenment is that they are *complete*: they contain every step and practice that we need to reach perfect enlightenment. And these steps are *unerring*, meaning that they really will work, if we just follow them as we are taught to.

These steps then are a *gift of liberation, thrust into our hands*. Our Lama is like a parent handing a piece of candy to a child; all we need to do is open up our hand and receive it. Our Lama knows what we need, and they know how to give it to us. We can relax and trust and practice with devotion.

The “personal” in the phrase “personal instruction” means that—if we learn to approach this teaching on the steps properly—then at every turn it will seem as if it was personally tailored to our own needs; a blessing of practicing the steps properly is that it constantly seems that our Lama, and the text, are speaking directly to our own particular problems and needs.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

The expression “high words” always applies to the words of an enlightened being; someone like Lord Buddha. The content of all of the 1,500 sutras (open teachings) and tantras (secret teachings) of Lord Buddha is in fact miraculously covered within this one teaching on the steps of the path.

The text was not concocted by its editor, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, but is in fact a careful record, *notes*, taken when his own Heart Teacher, Pabongka Rinpoche, imparted the steps to his students. Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche pays thus homage to his Teacher, and notes further that this teaching is not simply a scholarly work—rather, it is based upon his Heart Lama’s *personal experience of the steps of the path*.

And then in the title Kyabje Rinpoche pays homage to the great Master of all of the teachings on the steps: to the *King of the Dharma*, Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419), teacher of His Holiness the First Dalai Lama and founder of our Gelukpa lineage. These teachings on the steps are the *cream* of all the 10,000 pages which Je Tsongkapa ever wrote; and anyone who is really fortunate enough to study these instructions with a qualified Master will quickly see that Je Tsongkapa really is *matchless* among all Buddhist teachers that this world has ever seen.

And what he, *within his heart*, really wanted was for us to reach our own deathlessness.

The title of our text then is itself a brief summary of why it is quite surely one of the greatest spiritual books ever written in this world.]

3) It is traditional, as a Buddhist author begins a work of major importance, to make a formal promise to complete the work, or die trying. How do we see this promise made here at the beginning of the *Gift of Liberation*, and how might we relate to such a promise ourselves?

[Kyabje Rinpoche first makes just such a promise in the opening pages of our text by saying, “I will now try my best to set down in writing just a tiny part of that magnificent teaching, fearing as I do that I might otherwise forget some part of it.”

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

Now that we are embarking upon years of teachings covering this same work, it might be appropriate for we ourselves to make a similar promise: to make the commitment to learn this teaching on the steps carefully, and to commit to passing it on in turn to the next generation. Having heard these instructions, we are honor bound to preserve them accurately and to share them in our own turn to others. We will need to work hard on our homeworks, in our study groups, and in our meditations to master the steps well enough to become the next link in this thousands-of-years-old tradition.]

4) How does Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche carefully honor his commitment to his Heart Teacher even in the way he refers to him? What greater expression of this commitment do we see in the text, and how did Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche's fulfillment of this commitment impact upon the rest of his life?

[Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche fulfills an important secret commitment by referring to his Heart Teacher in the words "that Being of Glory, unmatched in the kindness he has paid to us, our Holy Lama, whose name I utter only for great purpose: the revered Jampa Tendzin Trinley Gyatso, good and glorious, supreme."

Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche's commitment to his Heart Teacher is reflected best in the simple *existence* of the text we are studying. Remember that this work is not just one of the most important spiritual guidebooks ever assembled; it is as well perhaps the best-written and most carefully edited classic of modern Tibet before its loss in 1959.

To someone who knows about these things, the creation of this 800-page record of Pabongka Rinpoche's teachings from hastily written notes (prior to tape recorders!) is an unparalleled labor of love; it surely must have taken one or two decades of the best years of Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche's life. (He was, by the way, amazingly only 20 years old when these teachings were first delivered.)

Kyabje Rinpoche was a renowned scholar and author, and already a high incarnate Lama, who could just as well have spent these years on his own writings. But he chose instead to surrender his efforts to the wishes of his

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

Lama—who, as noted in the text itself, directed Kyabje Rinpoche to complete the record.

The good karma that this labor created is evident in the fact that—out of nearly a million monks in Tibet at the time—it was Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche who was later selected to become one of the two tutors of the newly recognized Dalai Lama. His success as a tutor is eloquently expressed by the simple example right now of this greatest of all the Dalai Lamas who have ever lived.]

5) What are 11 things that Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche has to say about the style in which his Heart Lama delivered the teaching of the *Gift of Liberation*? How does this impact on how we ourselves will give our own teachings of this text in the years to come?

[(1) Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche first lists a few of the important classics—by the likes of the “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama; His Holiness the Second Panchen Lama; and the renowned Kadampa Geshe Chekawa—which his Heart Lama utilized in the course of his teaching of the steps. That is, the Lama’s teaching was perfectly authentic.

(2) He then notes that his Teacher approached every single point from a wide variety of angles. He gave frequent real examples from real life to illustrate each topic covered—describing for example how practitioners known to his audience had succeeded in mastering the Meditation on Death.

(3) Being himself a famous debater, Pabongka Rinpoche also utilized logical arguments throughout his presentation—proving for example why our current mental and physical configuration is so perfect for getting to enlightenment quickly.

(4) Pabongka Rinpoche was also a “people’s Lama” who knew how to tell a good story, and we’ll see examples of this throughout the text—soon for example in the tale of how Lord Atisha brought these teachings from Indonesia.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

(5) Pabongka Rinpoche was a Lingse Geshe (in fact, from Gyalrong House of Sera Mey Monastery), and had memorized a great deal of important scripture, so was able to pull out frequent quotations from thousands of years of authoritative scriptural sources during the course of his teaching.

(6) He also had received a vast number of oral instructions from many Lamas and was able to incorporate the oral lineage into the teaching widely.

(7) He had the ability to give one teaching which was not only easy for beginners in the audience to grasp, but which also challenged and fit the minds of his more advanced students; that is, he was supremely able to tailor the teaching to the level of his audience.

(8) He was able to relate the teaching in such a way that his students were able to apply it to their own personal lives, easily; and not just leave it as philosophical speculation.

(9) He knew how to make his audience break up in laughter, to dispel any tiredness during the teaching.

(10) He knew how to reach into the hearts of his listeners and bring them to sweet tears.

(11) But he also knew how to strike fear into the hearts of his listeners, and compel them to commit themselves immediately to serious practice.

It is doubtful that any of us will ever be able to emulate completely Pabongka Rinpoche's mastery of these 11 important teaching skills. But we can aspire to them and do our best both to train ourselves carefully in what we hope to teach, and to do so in such a way which is inspiring and—frankly—entertaining to our listeners.

That is, we need to be able to morph to our audience's needs, and have vast amounts of authentic information at our fingertips to really be of great help to everyone we might meet as we conduct our teaching career.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class One

homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, meditating on things you plan to do today, and examining *why* you are doing them—what you hope to achieve. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Two: This One Chance

1) How did Pabongka Rinpoche begin his entire teaching? Whom did he quote, and for what purpose?

[Pabongka Rinpoche starts his entire opus magnum by asking us to examine why we have come to the teaching, and he begins this examination by quoting the greatest master ever seen in the history of Tibet, and very likely in the history of Buddhism itself: Je Tsongkapa.

And it is not just any text by Je Tsongkapa that he quotes. Pabongka Rinpoche draws from Je Tsongkapa's *Song of My Spiritual Life*, with its distinctive treatment of the steps of the path: each one described and then followed by the words:

This is how I, the master practitioner,
Conducted my spiritual life;
Those of you who hope for freedom
Should seek to do the same.

Pabongka Rinpoche is encouraging us as well to emulate the example of Je Tsongkapa, who did things for the right reason.

In the section quoted, Je Tsongkapa is describing just how precious our current configuration of body and mind is. This is the beginning of the exercise of examining why we do any particular action at all.]

2) How is the idea of *sansara*, or a self-perpetuating wheel of pain, reflected in our everyday activities?

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Two

[Our theme in this course is examining why we undertake each and every action of our life, even those which require only a few moments' time. Before we do perform any action, one of the best things we can do is to remind ourselves of the *sansara* or cycle involved in it.

That is, we can expect from the very beginning of each and every project and relationship which we undertake that it will go through a predictable cycle of starting, developing, aging, and then dying—no matter how much we try to fool ourselves by saying that this time it will be different.

We normally think of the word *sansara* as referring to a cycle of rebirths, but we are constantly subjected to this more pernicious cycle constantly within our everyday life. Unless we really acquaint ourselves with the spiritual principles behind the workings of reality itself, then we can have no reasonable expectation that what whatever we're doing now to try to find happiness is going to be any different than every attempt we made before.

Our new relationship will get old, and it will fade away, to be replaced by another. And then one day all our energy to undertake new relationships will be exhausted, and we will simply finish. If we train ourselves to stay aware of this as we start new things or even just plan our day, we have a chance to find a greater and lasting happiness.]

3) Pabongka Rinpoche, attempting to convince us that the body and mind we are endowed with now are more useful even than a gem that grants ones every wish for things of the world, takes us through a list of goals which we can achieve so long as we still have this body and mind. Name these goals.

[Pabongka Rinpoche first says that—even if all we seek for in our life is to avoid the suffering of the three lower realms (animal, craving spirit, or hellbeing)—this can be achieved by using our current configuration of body and mind.

He says next that we can also go further and achieve great heights after we die: an existence as an extraordinarily powerful being that can move whole worlds.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Two

By using this body and mind wisely we can also reach a state of great personal happiness, by reaching nirvana in this life: the permanent end of every negative emotion. This then will take us out of the cycle of having to incarnate in any kind of form—miserable or powerful—which would eventually age and die.

Our body and mind can also take us on to the state of complete enlightenment, a place from which we can serve every living being upon every planet. In particular, they are perfectly suited for higher practices which can consummate this enlightenment within a single lifetime, rather than waiting for billions upon billions of years.

And so in this part of our meditation, before we undertake even just a small daily action, we pause to reflect about how extraordinarily special our particular mind and body are—about just how many goals they enable us to achieve.]

4) When we place our thoughts on how fortunate we are to have a body and mind which are so perfect for achieving both our spiritual goals and our immediate life goals, another thought comes almost automatically. Explain, with regard both to this life and the next.

[When we sincerely become completely aware of how very perfect this body and mind are for reaching everything we could ever want, the next thought that comes immediately to mind is that they won't last very long—that we never know when we might lose them.

In a way then this applies to every good thing that ever happens in our entire life. The minute that things are going well—the minute that we really give some thought to how lucky we are right now—then the next thought which comes naturally is that we can't really know how long these things will last. We know, deep down, that they can't stay forever.

From this comes the next thought: And where will I go after that? In the context of having found a perfect life, the question of where we go next is frankly frightening. Do I simply disappear? Do I come back to something like what I've been living? Or are there other places where a person could go, places that I can't even imagine?

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Two

This same applies to our incredible opportunity in terms of every moment of our life. We've seen how we learn to approach everything we intend to do—even down to eating a meal—by first examining what we hope to achieve. During the length of this process we do almost a mini-lam-rim meditation.

We think of what a precious thing the next few hours of our life are, and then we give some thought to what would happen if we lost this opportunity. What would I do—what will I do—when my body and my mind are no longer able to support activities of the kind that I'm about to undertake? What will happen to me then?]

5) So we have an almost automatic progression of thoughts: how lucky I am to have this immediate opportunity of my life, and a feeling of stark emptiness ahead when I think of what might happen to me if I lost it. What is the next thought then that naturally comes into our mind, both in terms of our entire life and of any one event within it?

[When we face a void ahead in our life, wondering what we would do with ourselves if we lost the circumstances we now enjoy, the next thought that comes to mind is whether or not there is any way for us to affect what comes to us then.

For a person who understands that the events which approach us from the future are actually being projected by our own mind, this is again a frightening prospect. The entire vista of the world before us is being generated by infinitesimally tiny seeds buried deep within our subconscious.

These could be seeds from the major deeds of good or evil that we have done in our life, but the scary thing is that they could equally be seeds from small things that we've done almost offhandedly.

Pabongka Rinpoche gives the example of killing a bedbug, which was a common enough occurrence in the Tibet of his time—a monk might have a few dozen crawling around on him at any given time in one of the major monasteries around Lhasa.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Two

If for some nearly random reason this seed happens to ripen just at the moment of our death, then it could easily throw us into a realm of extraordinary pain. The point then is that we cannot predict what will happen to us when the seeds run out for our present moments of opportunity. There are almost infinite possibilities about where we can go next, spanning the entire range from pleasure to intense torment.

And then naturally the next thought which comes to mind is to wonder if there is any way we can take control of the process—whether there is any kind of person or thing which can give us an assurance of protection as we fly into the unknown future.

These thoughts again apply not only to the conclusion of our current life, but equally to every moment within this life. We could at any instant lose the opportunity and circumstances which we enjoy in this hour. And what will come in the next phase of our life—a phase which is most often forced upon us by unexpected circumstances—is something that, given the fickle forces which create reality, we simply have no knowledge of or control over.

Which means that we need to prepare some kind of assurances, some kind of protection, for the future.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, meditating on things you plan to do today, and reflecting upon what a fantastic opportunity lies before you. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Three: Meeting our Mothers

1) While we proceed through this course and examine what our hopes are as we undertake any small activity in our life, we naturally discover that we are most often wishing to achieve some kind of personal success, whether it be at work or in a relationship. What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about these kinds of goals?

[Pabongka Rinpoche points to the extremes which we encounter over the course of thousands of lifetimes: we have spun from paradises to hell realms; from walks in celestial gardens to running across burning iron plains; from cups of wine in the god realms to having molten steel poured down our gullets; to standing in the arms of celestial youths and maidens to standing naked and encircled by the bestial guardians of the hells.

In our own personal daily practice, we can apply this to our immediate experience. In our mind's eye we are constantly hoping that we will end up on top: as the vice president of the company, as the single object of someone's attentions. But even if we do, then the nature of the forces behind this reality is that we are once again thrown down to the depths.

No one can stay in high position indefinitely—even those who do not lose their position eventually age, weaken, and sicken, unable even to rise from their bed. And even those few who are able to remain with an exquisite partner into their old age then lose them, finding depths of loneliness much greater than all the companionship they ever enjoyed.

Our goal then must be to discover the real forces behind these events, and transform them to create a happiness which will stay.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Three

2) What disadvantages of success or position does Pabongka Rinpoche describe in relationship to the future of our own mind?

[All forms of what we can call “ignorant success” come at the cost of certain inevitable problems—the kinds of problems that give us, one by one, our grey hairs and the wrinkles on our face. The longer that we remain in a successful position or successful relationship, the more these wrinkles and grey hairs pile up, simply through the passage of time and the small problems of the day.

Our mindstream though stretches forward into infinity; take the problems that you have had in the last week, and then imagine them multiplied by thousands or millions of years. It becomes more a problem of intense boredom with a constant, unremitting regimen of problems—the *same* problems—day after day, year after year.

Even position left unchallenged, even position before it begins its inevitable decline, is still a constant misery.]

3) Pabongka Rinpoche describes an entire range of sufferings that afflict beings who are reborn in the exalted but temporary realms of the full and partial pleasure beings. But they also apply to ourselves, and our everyday life here in the human realm. Explain.

[Pabongka Rinpoche first reminds us of the sufferings of humans. To begin with, there is the terribly painful birth required to get us into this realm. And then immediately the aging process begins, culminating in wrinkles, the skin going flabby, the slow decay of the skeleton until we are wizened and bent, with no energy left to us.

And during this entire process there are thousands of things that can go wrong with the body, crammed as it is with complicated parts—where if a single organ begins malfunctioning slightly, every other part starts to break down: the world of cancer and heart disease, of stomach pains and blood problems, hypertension and obesity.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Three

Then finally in the human realm is our inevitable death, and the effective cancellation of all the possessions and accomplishments and position we have assembled over the course of a lifetime.

In all of these realms there is the constant suffering of losing those people and things that are dear to us, and of being unable to get the objects and relationships we do want.

In many ways the sufferings of our current life in the Western countries are very similar to those of the full pleasure beings. They live very long lives of relative comfort and happiness, but as this karma begins to decline they undergo a very clear and terrifying perception of the death which approaches.

It is said that the pleasure beings are free of two of the three forms of suffering: they suffer from no outright pain, and during the length of their lives their general level of happiness doesn't change much. But they do possess what is called "pervasive" suffering: the simple fact that the tremendous forces which are creating their body and mind must eventually wear out, and throw them back into intense suffering.

This great fall from realms of high happiness into worlds of intense suffering is said to be because they have used up all the good seeds in their subconscious through the very act of living in the higher realms. We observe this phenomenon in our own lives, where moments of great happiness within careers or relationships are often followed immediately by the lowest depths of unhappiness.

And, as Pabongka Rinpoche points out, even before we reach the bottom after having been on the top there is an intense suffering of becoming aware that we are no longer in control of what is happening to us: a bitter feeling of helplessness, as things begin to decline.

A final suffering that the Rinpoche lists is with the partial pleasure beings. They are slightly less in their glory and enjoyments than the full pleasure beings, and so naturally they are eaten up by jealousy. This leads to destructive conflict between those beings who are otherwise blessed with all that they could hope for. Even those of us here in the human realm who

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Three

are blessed with relative wealth and happiness still suffer from this affliction, comparing ourselves constantly with others.]

4) What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about whether these are good times in the world, or bad?

[Pabongka Rinpoche displays a rare bit of peevishness when he speaks of people who say that these are bad times in the world:

Most of us tend to think that we won't be able to achieve the high spiritual goals in this life; and we make prayers that we'll be able to do better in the next. But the body and mind that we have now are perfect for accomplishing these goals: we have attained a human body complete with all the necessary opportunity; we have met with the teachings of the Buddha; and all the rest.

We are free of what would prevent us from reaching these goals, and we have all the things we could ever need to help. If we attain these goals now, then how could we ever do so later?

...Admittedly we see a lot of people nowadays who say these are the days of dark; that these are bad times. But you and I have never seen better times, in all of the time that we've spent here in the cycle of pain, for time with no beginning.

And so we should have heart, and look forward to all the things we can accomplish if we try, now.]

5) How does a sense of responsibility tie into a review of our thoughts as we begin to engage in any activity, such as coming to a teaching?

[In the course of examining our thoughts as we begin to engage in any activity at all, we actually end up going through a brief review of all of the steps of the path. That is, we evaluate the activity that we are about to undertake, and ask ourselves what we hope to gain from it, what we want to do.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Three

Inevitably this takes us to the question of whether this activity is going to have any effect upon the more serious issues of our life—whether this activity will contribute in any way towards protecting us from the vicissitudes of life, and what might happen afterwards.

If we do find a way to gain this protection, then the question arises of how responsible we are for making sure that others gain the same protection. Here we need to go through a bit of logic.

Buddhism says that the ineffable stuff of mind cannot come from the concrete stuff of the body as its immediate, primary cause: as the cause from which it flows. Mind arises out of a previous instance of mind. This means that there must have been a mind around for the first moment of our current life's mind to flow from. That is, we have lived before.

The life we had before, in turn, arose from the last moments of the mind of the last life before that, and so on, back into infinity. Since we have lived infinite numbers of lives before, we have all met each other before. Not only that, but we have been everything to each other, countless times, in the past. I have been born countless times from your womb, and you from mine.

And after I was born from Your womb, you cared for me as your child, in countless ways, teaching me to walk, to eat, to speak. If our own mother in this current life were standing in front of a car, about to be hit, we would certainly move to help her—if we didn't, we would truly be shameless. But since every other living being has also been our mother, we have the same responsibility towards them as well.

We are honor bound then to help those around us gain real protection, in the same way that we seek it for ourselves. We are honor bound to find, if it is possible, any way of *becoming* this protection—for them.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Three

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, thinking about one activity that you plan to engage in today, and considering how it might help protect you in an unknown future. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Four: Sweetening Our Motivation

1) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the traditional motivation of our lineage with which to engage in listening to the teachings on the steps of the path? How might people of two different levels raise this motivation, and how can we “sweeten” our motivation?

[Pabongka Rinpoche is clear that a unique feature of the Gelukpa lineage—the lineage begun by Je Tsongkapa and extending down through the Dalai Lamas—is always to walk into a teaching on the steps to enlightenment with the motivation that, with this knowledge and practice, we will be able to help and serve every single being in every corner of the universe.

He says that people who are already deeply familiar with the Wish to achieve enlightenment for others (*bodhichitta*) might be able to bring up this motivation with no more than reciting one of the preliminary prayers for a teaching.

But others of us need, before a teaching, to sit down and devote some good time to observing the motivation with which we have come to the teaching. And to do so, we use the practice we have been learning: of examining our hearts very honestly to find the 3 or 4 factors that have influenced us to come to the teaching, and then to follow these forth through their necessary implications until we “sweeten” our motivation for attending the teaching, or for doing anything else at all.

For example, if we find that we have come to a teaching primarily for the company of spiritually-minded friends (which is fine as an initial motivation), we follow this train of thought: Where will these friends, and myself, be in 10 years? Where are the friends I had ten years ago? How many will be with me, how many will even be alive, in 20 or 30 years?

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Four

Which of us will go first, and who will be last? What can we expect of the void that follows our death? What seeds have we been working on most of all? How happy am I now (for if I am not, and if that is amplified many times upon my death, where will I go)?

Which is to say, what sort of world will the seeds in my mind throw forth ahead of me as I die? And how can I take refuge for that day—what kind of practices done now can assure that a frightening world is not thrown ahead? This then brings us to seek to improve our understanding of where the things and people in our life really come from, for only these seeds can assure that a good world is thrown ahead.]

2) What are three tests that we might look for in determining whether a particular spiritual path is authentic? What role does the teaching on the steps of the path play in achieving enlightenment within a single human life?

[Pabongka Rinpoche mentions three tests that we might look for in determining whether a particular spiritual path is authentic. First it should have been set forth by an enlightened founder of a tradition; in our case, it should first have been set forth by Lord Buddha.

Secondly, this teaching should have been further clarified by qualified teachers over the generations, each in the context of their own listeners, in the language of their own times. In contrast to the normal flow of things, Buddhism over the centuries has actually gotten *more clear and simple* as a steady flow of commentators has illuminated the meaning of things to each succeeding generation.

Thirdly, real practitioners should have tried putting these instructions into actual practice, and succeeded in doing so. The teachings must have *worked* for people like us.

It is said in the Buddhist tradition that the only way to attain enlightenment within one lifetime—the only way to enter an angelic body of light in which we can appear to all living beings and guide each of them—is to practice what is known as the “Diamond Way,” or secret teachings.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Four

These are special instructions from our Heart Teacher which might for example enable us to see that a person sitting in our study group for this course is in actuality an emanation of Je Tsongkapa, the founder of the lineage, come to guide us personally.

Needless to say, it's a wonderful feeling to realize that the person you're sitting next to and having a hot chocolate with is actually an enlightened being watching out for you.

Pabongka Rinpoche makes the point that the only way of having experiences like this is if we possess the foundation of the teachings on the steps to enlightenment—the very same steps which we have already reviewed quickly as we examined and sweetened our motivation for taking this teaching.]

3) When did the “lam rim,” or the “teachings on the steps to enlightenment,” begin? What are the two great divisions of the lineage of these steps, and through whom have they passed down to us?

[Pabongka Rinpoche makes the point that people commonly associate the beginning of the teachings on the steps to enlightenment, or the “lam rim” in Tibetan, with the writing of a number of books called “lam rim” by Je Tsongkapa. His *Great Book on the Steps to Enlightenment*, for example—the “Lam Rim Chen Mo”—is considered one of the greatest books ever written in the Tibetan language.

The Rinpoche though tells us that in this world the lineage of the lam-rim teachings began with no one less than Lord Buddha himself. He warns us not to think that having the words “lam rim” or “steps to enlightenment” in the title of a book is not the only thing that makes the teaching one upon this subject.

In fact, he says, the teachings on the Perfection of Wisdom—on how to utilize on a day-to-day basis the understanding that this world is flowing from seeds within our own mind—are the original lam-rim, and the highest teachings ever given by the Buddha.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Four

The two great divisions of the teachings upon the steps to enlightenment are (1) the “profound” steps and (2) the “far-reaching” steps. The former steps are presented explicitly in the teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom, and treat the subject of emptiness—the fact that there is nothing in the world which *does not* come from how we treat others.

These steps were passed down from Lord Buddha through the angelic being of wisdom named Gentle Voice (*Manjushri* in Sanskrit, and *Jampel Yang* in Tibetan), and down to us via Master Nagarjuna, a great Seer of Emptiness from about 200AD.

The latter steps, the “far-reaching” ones, treat the subject of love for all living beings; they were passed down from Lord Buddha to Lord Maitreya (the coming Buddha), and then through Master Asanga, a sage from the fourth century who is said to have taken dictation directly from Maitreya.

We can feel the relationship between these two great lines: we need to love others fully, in order to plant the seeds which project a world of beauty upon the blank screen of the world.]

4) What are three different forms in which the teachings on the steps of enlightenment have been passed down in Tibet, and how do these reflect our own courses of study?

[Practitioners of the steps in Tibet who studied in great depth were called *Shungbawa*, or *Students of the Classics*. This would correspond to our own 18 courses of detailed study of all the five great subjects, within the Asian Classics Institute.

Those who preferred a slightly condensed presentation were called *Lamrimpa*, or *Students of the Steps*. As we will see, these steps also covered the subject matter of the five great subjects, but in a less detailed way.

Other disciples responded better to brief personal instructions from their Lamas, and this type came to be known as *Dam-Ngakpa*, or *Students of the Advices*.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Four

Obviously each of the three approaches has its advantages. Those who study all the classics in detail have a bigger “toolkit” for helping others and answering questions within their own mind. Practitioners with other a lot of other commitments of time might prefer the steps, which are also especially effective for teaching a lot of the general population.

Those who are attracted to a deep relationship with a Heart Teacher will respond better to personal advices, which are perhaps the fastest and surest method of spiritual progress in the continued personal presence of such a guide.]

5) Traditionally, when the steps to enlightenment are taught in a large public group in Tibet, the Lama will actually refer to 8 different great classics upon this subject. Give at least the names of the eight (for us, Pabongka Rinpoche’s text would be a ninth).

[Here are the eight traditional presentations. Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419) composed (1) the *Great Book on the Steps of the Path*, the famed *Lamrim Chenmo*, with some thousand pages of explanation. For the ease of his students he shortened this to (2) *The Medium-Length Book on the Steps of the Path*, and then further into (3) *The Brief Presentation on the Steps of the Path*, which is also known by the name of *A Song of My Spiritual Life*.

In the first of these texts, Je Tsongkapa mentions that others may wish to create similar, briefer works, and in keeping with this His Holiness the Third Dalai Lama, Sunam Gyatso (1543-1588) completed (4) *The Essence of Refined Gold*. His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682), then wrote (5) *The Word of Gentle Voice* almost as a commentary upon this.

Then came (6) *The Path of Bliss*, by His Holiness the First Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chukyi Gyeltsen (1570-1662), followed by (7) *The Quick Path*, almost a commentary on the First Panchen Lama’s work, by His Holiness the Second Panchen Lama, Lobsang Yeshe (1663-1737). And then finally there is (8) *Sweet Juice of the Heart*, written by Dakpo Gomchen Ngawang Drakpa (exact dates unknown, but born in the 15th century).

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Four

The point here is again that great personalities of each generation bring the steps to the people of their country and their times, in the language of the day, almost as if they were emanations of Je Tsongkapa himself.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, thinking about how you might pass this teaching on; checking and sweetening the motives you might have for doing so. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Five: Your Buddha Seeds

1) Pabongka Rinpoche begins the second day of his teaching by quoting a famous verse from Je Tsongkapa's *Three Principal Paths*:

As far as I am able I'll explain
The essence of all high teachings of the Victors,
The path all their holy children commend,
The entry point for the fortunate seeking freedom.

How does the Rinpoche explain these lines, and how do they relate to our practice of the steps of the path?

[Pabongka Rinpoche relates the last three lines to the three principal paths. The “essence of all high teachings of the Victors,” he says, is a reference to the first path: recognizing the pain of the world and deciding that we must escape it, whether it is the pain of passing into a lower realm after our death, or the many pains of a human life, such as we currently undergo.

The words “holy children” then are a reference to bodhisattvas, who “commend,” or advise us to follow, the path of a love where we want to save the entire world from pain—the second of the three paths.

And then the “entry point for the fortunate who seek freedom” is the third principal path: a knowledge of the way that the world works, through emptiness and karmic seeds.

These are the three attitudes which will make of us angels who can help all beings; and to train ourselves in them we must learn and follow the lam-rim, the steps of the path to enlightenment which he is about to explain.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

We can say then that the massive body of teachings upon the steps of the path is all meant to help us understand that the world is a place of great pain (path #1)—a place which we can ourselves transform into an enlightened paradise (path #2), if we learn where reality comes from (path #3).]

2) Why does Pabongka Rinpoche get into the ingredients for Tibetan tea at this point?

[Tibetan tea is not just a favorite beverage in the Land of Snows—it provides the basis for the “protein bar” which is often all that a Tibetan monk eats during the peak years of his training.

That is, every busy monk keeps with him a small bag of *tsampa*, or roasted barley flour, which is highly nutritious and easy to make. As a quick meal while memorizing a text or reviewing a class he will pour some butter tea into a bowlful of the flour, knead it into small balls of dough, and chomp them down, hardly looking. Every monk in the audience during Pabongka Rinpoche’s talks would be making 10 to 20 cups of butter tea a day.

Butter tea itself requires a long list of ingredients: Chinese black tea, salt, rancid butter, milk, cream, baking soda and even nutmeg. The ingredients must be stored carefully to retain their freshness and flavor, and they must be added together in a very specific order and timing.

Pabongka Rinpoche compares the process of getting ourselves enlightened to making butter tea. It would be crazy to store all the different ingredients of tea together in a single container, and to throw them into the tea kettle in a random order.

The idea is that, first of all, enlightenment demands a certain very specific formula of spiritual realizations. In our modern times we might compare it to the parts of a car—each one has a vital function in getting the car to start and run, and it’s certainly not as if we could just leave a few parts out and expect the car to work. We need to learn ahead of time what these realizations are, and make sure that we gather all of them together.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

As important as having all the ingredients to the recipe is understanding the order in which have to use them to make a good cup of tea. The parts in the engine of a car must start in a certain order, and not just haphazardly. We can be blessed with deep spiritual insights, but they must come in a specific order to get us to enlightenment.

No one would dump all the ingredients for a tea into a single jar to store them until the next cup of tea: try to imagine a jar full of soft butter mixed with cold milk and tea leaves. We need to know where we can get the ingredients, have each of them ready separately, and then use them at the proper time.

Our spiritual life is exactly the same. We need to learn the ingredients, or the steps, to our enlightenment—and then we have to add them one to the next, in a very specific order, with no less precision and care than we would use in putting together the engine of a car.]

3) What are the four great traditional divisions to teaching the steps of the path to enlightenment? What two sources do they relate to, and how might they apply in the context of a modern life?

[We first learn of (1) the greatness of the person who brought us the instructions of the steps to the path; by gaining an appreciation of this person's qualities, we come to believe that the teaching has an authentic source.

We then explore the results that we can expect from the teaching granted by this holy being, and thus (2) gain a respect for the greatness of their instructions. After this, we need to learn (3) how these instructions are properly taught by the teacher and learned by the student. Only then are we ready to (4) proceed through actual instructions themselves.

These four divisions relate to a tradition that was current at the ancient Indian monastery of Vikramalashila, more than a thousand years ago—one first learned of the greatness of the person who had composed the training; then the greatness of the training itself; and finally the proper methods of granting and receiving the training.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

This in itself derived from an earlier tradition from the greatest Buddhist university of ancient times: Nalendra, which is said to have been founded in 427AD and destroyed in 1197AD. Here the emphasis was upon the “three purities”: the Teacher’s words must be pure; the disciple’s heart must be pure; and the instructions being taught must be pure.

How would all this apply in a modern context? If we came into contact with a particular system of teaching, we would first investigate the person who had designed it, or was passing it on. We would check and see if they had developed the kinds of high personal qualities that we ourselves were seeking.

This in itself would kindle within us a desire to explore their teachings. Very importantly then we would have to ask them the proper way that they recommended for studying with them, and we would try to observe how they themselves passed on the instructions, in anticipation of performing this role ourselves in the next generation. And then we would actually begin the learning.]

4) What two scenarios does Pabongka Rinpoche describe for failing in our spiritual quest?

[The first scenario is not so hard to imagine: we fall into a particular spiritual path, but we fail to look into it sufficiently ahead of time, and when we experience some small failures we lose faith and give up.

Perhaps, says the Rinpoche, we simply lack from the beginning the mental capacity to understand and follow the path; or the ability to work as hard as we will need to in order to make the path work for us. He seems to feel that this in itself would not be such a shame.

What he obviously cannot bear though is a situation where the disciple does have the intelligence to follow a path, and is willing to make the necessary effort—but where the path itself is bogus, or based on mistaken ideas that could never work anyway. He says that we have all seen people who wasted their lives this way, and he seems almost ready to cry from frustration.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

5) How did the name “lam-rim,” or a teaching on the steps of the path, begin in Tibet? What are some different optional names that were current in olden times for this kind of teaching? How are they described by Jamyang Shepay Dorje (1648-1721), the great author of textbooks for Tibet’s Drepung Monastery? How does his description impact on our own practice of the steps?

[Pabongka Rinpoche and Jamyang Shepay Dorje both mention and explain some of these older names. “Lam-rim” of course means “steps of the path,” and the Rinpoche explains that the name as it is used in Tibet derives from Lord Atisha’s *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, which as we will see was written specifically by this master for the Tibetan people just beginning their practice of the Buddhist path.

Another very common name for the same style of presentation was *ten-rim*, or the “steps of the teaching.” An ancient work called *The Great Book on the Steps of the Teaching* was written Geshe Drolungpa around 1100AD, and is the premier work of this name.

Lam-chok was another name used for the lam-rim style, and means simply “the path supreme.” Yet another term was *tenpay solka*, or “the way of the teaching.”

Jamyang Shepay Dorje goes into the details of these names because he very much wants us to understand a certain crucial point. He expresses his disappointment with the fact that many Tibetans think that the lam-rim teachings present only the open instructions of Buddhism, and not those of the secret way.

He says that implicit in all of these ancient names for the lam-rim is the idea of *the whole path*, or *the whole teaching*, the *whole way*—that the lam-rim teachings were indeed also meant to present the secret way. They present it so well, he says, that you can even say that the lam-rim is a teaching on how any *single* person can achieve enlightenment in a *single* sitting.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

6) The person who first brought the teachings of the lam-rim to Tibet was Lord Atisha. Tibetan sources date his birth to 982AD; describe the circumstances of his birth, relating it to the birth of Lord Buddha, and to your own birth.

[Pabongka Rinpoche begins his description of Lord Atisha's life by mentioning that he was born into circumstances of great material wealth: "in a palace with no less than 13 cupolas covered in pure gold, adorned with 25,000 banners woven in golden threads," etc etc.

The point on one hand is to say that—as in the case of Lord Buddha, and as well with Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness—Lord Atisha as he grows up demonstrates the strength of character to turn his back on material comforts, and to seek the spiritual path in order to benefit all the people of the world. But there is a deeper lesson here.

It is to be expected that a person who has accumulated sufficient karmic seeds to meet with a high path—a path that can enable him or her to save the world itself—would come into this world in circumstances of great material wealth as well. That is, the karma to produce a holy being would naturally be expected to create, at the same time, a lifetime of substantial material means.

And you see, this applies to each and every one of us here in the modern world who have met the path. We live in a world of automobiles and airplanes and the internet and entire countries covered with highways and vast fields of grain that were unimaginable even to the princes who became Lord Atisha and Lord Buddha.

We have been born into the greatest material wealth known in the history of humankind, and it is a sign—a sign that we have extraordinary karmic seeds within us, seeds that have produced for us the teachings of the lam-rim, and someone to teach them to us. Seeds that will enable us to transform ourselves, seeds for each one of us to save the world.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Five

homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, contemplating the fact that you were born into greater wealth even than Lord Buddha or Lord Atisha, and must thus possess all the seeds needed to reach your own enlightenment. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Six: Inside the Secret Teachings

1) Describe Lord Atisha’s reaction, as a young boy, when he was presented by his parents with the subjects he was to rule. How does Pabongka Rinpoche comment upon this reaction?

[As an infant, Lord Atisha is brought by his parents—the King and Queen—to a nearby temple. The subjects of the realm gather upon each side of the road, and the Lord asks his parents, “Who are these people?”

They tell him, “Why, these are the people that you rule; the subjects who wait upon your every command.”

And the Lord’s reaction is to sing a verse of goodness; here are his actual words—

He looks upon them with perfect love, and makes on them this wish:

May each and every one of them
Be born as I’ve been born—
The highest child
Of the Lord of Men,
Blessed with excellent parents,
Shining in the glory of good,
Commanding an entire kingdom.
And then may they each be sustained
By the highest form of Dharma.

That is, it never occurs to him to take advantage of these people, to use them in any way. He only wishes upon them all the goodness that he himself enjoys, both temporal and spiritual.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

Pabongka Rinpoche says that—if Lord Atisha had done nothing else in his life—this demonstration of love as an infant would alone have marked him as a truly holy being.]

2) It is said that, at the tender age of 6, Lord Atisha “already understood how to make the distinction between the inner and the outer.” Pabongka Rinpoche and others state that this is an extraordinary level of understanding; and the Lord himself later remarked that “There are only three people in the world who really understand this point: myself, Naropa, and Shantipa. Naropa is gone [one source says, to the Heaven of the Angel], and I have come to Tibet. [Another source adds here: “Shantipa has passed away.”] And so things in India are bad.” What does this distinction involve, and how can we utilize it on our spiritual journey?

[The fact that Lord Atisha had grasped this distinction is mentioned in various sources, but few of them discuss what it actually involves. Dzeme Rinpoche, one of the closest disciples of Trijang Rinpoche, says that this is a reference to the difficulty of distinguishing what is inner and what is outer in the tantric teachings.

He goes on to discuss a misunderstanding about what “inner” and “outer” refer to in the system of the Wheel of Time, or Kalachakra. In understanding this system, two ideas are very important.

One is that we need to have a clear idea about how the appearance that the things around us are outside of us, and seem therefore not to come from us, can be reconciled with what we understand is really happening: that seeds in our mind are opening and creating images that we impose upon the raw data around us.

That is, are we just living a lonely life within our own heads? Is everyone around us just a figment of my own imagination? How then can I interact with people in a meaningful way?

The masters of the Middle Way explain this for us by saying that, yes, things that appear to be outside of us are coming from us—but our mind is

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

projecting them *as* outside things, which means that they *are* outside things, and we can have meaningful interactions with them.

The secret teachings of the Kalachakra take this theme one step further, into what we can call the “Onion Skin” model of how we relate to the outside world. In this model, we see ourselves, and the world and the people around us, as being like layers of an onion.

One layer is obviously our gross physical body, which is sustained by food and the oxygen in our breath. The breath itself is connected to the next layer down, which is the prana or inner energy which passes through thousands of tiny light channels of an inner body that provides the foundation for our gross body of skin and flesh.

Upon this prana rests another layer, our thoughts, riding upon the prana, but also providing the basis for the prana when these thoughts cause us to perform actions of body, speech, or mind. These actions are karma, the seeds of karma, which provide another layer down—all the physical parts of ourselves are forming around how we have treated others in the past, in the same way that ice forms layers around a twig, and these layers take the outline of the twig.

At the core of it all is the final inner layer—emptiness—comparable to the little round empty spot that we see in the very middle of an onion. This is the fact that at bottom everything in the world is like a white movie screen before the movie is projected onto it; we can call it “availability” really, the fact that nothing is anything until a karmic seed opens in our mind and forces us to see it in a certain way.

We can see the “inner” layers of ourselves then as starting with emptiness; which determines and is determined by our thoughts; which ride on but also direct our prana; which is channeled through our inner body and provides the basis for breath; which sustains the gross outer body, all the way out to the skin.

But what about beyond the skin?

One of the deepest teachings of the Kalachakra system is that our outer world is just one more layer of our own being: it too is forming around the

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

patterns of how we treat others, how well we take care of them. The highways and cities and countryside and weather that surround us are all following the pattern of how we care for others. This means that we can literally change the world just by working on our own thoughts and behavior.

And this then is the “breakthrough” realization that Lord Atisha had by the age of 6—the understanding of the distinction between inner & outer!]

3) At the age of 11, already under pressure from his parents to begin seeking a wife in order to birth and child to continue the royal lineage, Lord Atisha has a vision of a young maiden whose body glows in a sky-blue light. Some texts say this was an emanation of Tara, another says it was the Angel of Diamond. She says to him:

One Man Divine,
You possess high fortune;
Have no desire, no desire.

If you my Warrior
Were ever mired
Here in the swamp of desire,
It would be like an elephant
Sinking into a marsh.

Wouldn't you lose those lovely robes
Of the morality that you wear?

How does Pabongka Rinpoche interpret the first verse here, and how does he relate it to our lives?

[Pabongka Rinpoche first says that the Angel's repetition of the words “no desire, no desire” has great meaning. He says that the first means that we should have no desire for the pain of this life, and that the second means that we should have none for the pain of any kind of cyclic existence.

But what the Rinpoche really focuses upon is the metaphor of an elephant who is mired in a swamp of desire. He says that when a normal person

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

makes errors in their daily behavior, there is no great danger to the teachings and the world at large. But suppose a person has great spiritual potential—suppose there is a person who possesses all the material means and spiritual instruction that they need to make great progress along a path which can bring happiness to the entire world.

Be aware that Pabongka Rinpoche is not just talking here about Lord Atisha; he is talking about you and me. We are ourselves in this unique position, of understanding the crucial points of the spiritual path and possessing all the circumstances we need to use this understanding to help the entire world, in a very real and immediate way.

This is why the Angel has mentioned an elephant—the mightiest creature of the ancient world, the most fearsome war machine of olden times. We here now are spiritual juggernauts, we have the power to change an entire world.

An elephant though is heavy, and if they become mired in a swamp they are even more likely than others to perish there. This is what it would be like if we were to become trapped in the worldly life, rather than devoting our life to helping others. Pabonkga Rinpoche says that when a person with high spiritual potential does become trapped, then they do great damage to the teachings themselves, and to every person in the country in which they live—to everyone they might have helped.

Remember that the Angel in these words is not advising Lord Atisha not to marry, or not to live a family way of life. It is in fact the Angel's job to appear oftentimes within a family context, as a spiritual partner. Rather, she is speaking against any way of life—family or monastic—where we fail to understand where things are really coming from, and fail to use such understanding in changing the world.]

4) What subterfuge did Lord Atisha resort to in order to obtain some of his first Dharma teachings? What lesson is there here for us in a modern life?

[In his early teens, Lord Atisha tells his parents that he will go on an expedition with 130 armed soldiers to survey the frontiers of the kingdom—the foothills of the Himalayas. Actually though the boy is hoping to find a spiritual teacher living in one of the caves there.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

And he does find the sage Jetari, who grants him the instructions and practices on refuge and the Wish for enlightenment. Master Jetari then advises Lord Atisha to visit the monastery of Nalendra, where he will find a Lama with whom he has shared a karmic connection for countless lifetimes.

As with most of the events of Lord Atisha's life, there is a moral for us in this incident. It is a lesson of skillful means: Lord Atisha's parents are an extremely high karmic object, he loves them and doesn't wish to upset them. The teachings though are an even higher object, and he must have them in order to help his parents and all other beings in an ultimate manner. And so he finds a way to do both.

Many of us are in a similar situation with our partner, family, or friends. We may not possess the seeds to see them having the same deep interest in the teachings that we do, at this particular time. (Although if we work at these seeds, we can consciously change their level of interest.)

On the one hand, we should keep the family and other commitments that we have made earlier, and also avoid bothering those who may not be interested at this time by insisting that they follow our interest. On the other hand, we owe it to everyone to reach our own enlightenment as soon as we are able.

And so we will have to find skillful ways of accommodating both flows in our life, until such time as they join into one. One way of planting the seeds for them to join into one would be trying to be more open to suggestions from others in day-to-day situations, such as with the family at home, or with co-workers at the office.]

5) What secret practice did Lord Atisha follow for 7 years early in his life; how did he learn it, and what was his position at this time? Who assisted him in obtaining the opportunity to do this, and what relationship would his Lamas and practices have with his earlier mastery of the "inner and outer"?

[The yogin named Rahula sends a group of wild yogis, men and women, to accompany the young Lord Atisha to the palace. As expected, the King and

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

Queen decide that it would be better for their son to engage in his spiritual practices privately with his new masters. They grant him permission to begin his training under Master Avadhuti, a major figure in both the open and secret traditions of the time, whose name appears frequently as an author or translator of works in the Tengyur.

Lord Atisha then spends 7 years during his 20's with this master, serving during this time as his “foot-wiper”: the scriptural term for a disciple who labors as a Lama's close attendant. The fact that Lord Atisha did so—the fact that he actively sought out the position with this name—is another sign that, as the scriptures put it, he “cared for name and fame no more than an accidental piece of spit that might slip from his mouth.”

During this period, the Lord learned what is frequently referred to simply as “The Practice of Avadhuti.” This would have consisted of techniques—such as completion-stage meditations and yoga asanas—designed to bring prana into the central channel, so that one could perceive emptiness directly, and transform ones body into that of an Angel who could serve all beings simultaneously, turning the world into an enlightened mandala. This calls back to the connection between the inner body and the outer body and world, which the Lord had grasped in his very early years.

It is significant that Lord Atisha's teacher was named Avadhuti, presumably because of his mastery of the Practice of Avadhuti and other such techniques for bringing prana into the central channel. Remember that the Sanskrit word *avadhuti* is itself one of the names for this channel, and refers to the goal of throwing (*dhuti*) off (*ava*) the stranglehold upon the central channel created by the two side channels of ignorant liking and disliking.

And it's no mistake that the name of the master who gets Lord Atisha to Master Avadhuti is “Rahula.” In Indian astrology this is the name for the Dark Planet, which is believed to consume the sun or moon temporarily during an eclipse. The two “bad guys,” the two side channels, are of course also known (see the Yoga Sutra) as the channels of the sun and moon; and thus yet another name for the central channel is “Rahula,” since it consumes these channels.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

6) What two practices was Lord Atisha strongly directed to follow, in order to make his practice of the secret teachings work?

[The story of Lord Atisha's spiritual training parallels that of quite a few of the greatest masters of India; that is, his capacity was so tremendous that he was granted the secret teachings very early on, and then later encouraged to delve deeper into aspects of the open teachings that would empower his secret practices even further. In Lord Atisha's case, there are two specific steps of this kind in his later training.

As we see described in greater detail in the classic history of Buddhism written by Sumbha Kenpo Yeshe Peljor (1704-1788), Lord Atisha took ordination quite late in his life: at the age of 29 (which in Tibetan reckoning would include the 9 months in the womb). This would be in a period of Asian history when the average lifespan was probably around 40 years.

As Pabongka Rinpoche notes, Lord Atisha after his 7 years in learning the practice of the central channel intended to delve deeply into the tantric practices of the Great Seal, or Mahamudra. His lama Rahula Gupta though perceives these intentions, and one day walks straight through the brick wall of Lord Atisha's residence in order to deliver him a blunt message: "What right do you have to ignore the beings of the world? You need to get ordained, and then you can really be of help to the teachings, and to a great many people!" The Lord receives the same orders from Lord Buddha and many other high beings, in visions.

And so Lord Atisha does become a monk, and spends many years of training in what could be described as the lowest school of Buddhism, related to the monk's way of life.

As with all the biography here, there is again a lesson for us. The engine that is going to drive Lord Atisha's transformation into a secret Angel as he continues his high tantric practices is nothing less than the most fundamental teachings on morality: the art of not hurting others.

In the following years of the Lord's life this theme is enhanced, as it should be, from the practice of not hurting up to taking responsibility for the enlightenment of all beings. Lord Atisha begins to be obsessed by the

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Six

question of how he can serve all beings in the very fastest way. His Lama, Rahula Gupta, reads his mind and gives him the following advice:

You may come to meet your close Angel face to face; masses of Angels of the secret world may show themselves to you; you may attain many of the miraculous powers shared by those of other traditions; and your concentration in meditation may be as unshakable as a major mountain chain, but you won't get anywhere.

You need to develop love and the Wish for enlightenment. Take Loving Eyes as your close Angel, for he is the Angel of compassion; and swear that you will serve the needs of others until the cycle of pain has been emptied of its last suffering creature.

Lord Atisha receives the same advice in miraculous encounters at the Seat of the Diamond—Bodhgaya, the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment.

The point then is that even after we have received empowerment into the secret teachings, it will be necessary for us to recommit ourselves to the foundation practices of not harming others, and the intention to become a Buddha to save all living beings.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, contemplating the relationship between the “inner” and “outer” worlds as described in our classes on this section of the text. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Seven: Lives for the Teaching

1) What are some of the names that we might see for the Lama who instructed Lord Atisha in the Wish for enlightenment? What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about Lord Atisha seeking these instructions so late in his training, and how might this apply to us?

[The Lama from the Golden Isle (now part of Indonesia) who granted Lord Atisha the instructions on the Wish for Enlightenment is called “Lama Serlingpa” (“Lama from the Golden Isle”) by the Tibetans. We sometimes see him also called Suvarna Dvipa Guru, which is the original Sanskrit for this name. What can really trip us up though is that his monk’s name was Dharmakirti—which of course is the same name as the great logician who lived hundreds of years earlier.

It’s quite natural for us to wonder why Lord Atisha was told by his teacher in India to focus on perfecting the Wish for enlightenment only well after his tantric studies—that he made the dangerous journey to Indonesia to learn a practice that, it is said, he had already mastered.

Pabongka Rinpoche anticipates this question by remarking that Lord Atisha by this point was already well versed in the Wish, but that he wanted to “develop within himself any points concerning the Wish that he had not already; and to expand even further his mastery of the other points.” That is, he had already mastered the Wish, but thought it was worth risking his life to expand this mastery.

The same point applies to us. If we are already engaged in serious spiritual practice in this particular tradition, then most likely we already possess both manifest and latent desires to save the world. But we all need to keep

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

coming back to this motivation, to see how the current phase of our spiritual life applies to creating a perfect world for all beings.

It's also worth noting that even if we possessed the Wish in its fullest form, we would still be looking for new techniques to help our own students to develop this Wish. And of course this is exactly what Lord Atisha did by bringing us the instructions of the Lama of the Golden Isle.]

2) Why does Pabongka Rinpoche spend so much time on the historical details of the life of Lord Atisha? How might this apply to ourselves?

[By far the most important reason that Pabongka Rinpoche spends so much time on the historical details is so that we who come later might gain a sense of gratitude for the many Lamas and other figures who devoted their entire lives—and in many cases lost their life—so that we could have this incredibly precious teaching on the steps to enlightenment.

Reviewing the major figures of the lineage also of course gives us an appreciation for the authenticity of the teaching we are about to receive. Hearing about the hardships and inner successes of these figures helps us through the difficult times in our own practice: if Master Naropa could have a bad day (or bad years) with his Lama, then maybe I'm not so bad.

It's important for us to turn this appreciation to our own immediate teachers. Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin (1921-2004) is the Lama who passed this *Gift of Liberation* on to our own generation, spending a great deal of his life in a strange foreign country in order to pass pure teachings on freely, for over 30 years, to unruly students who had no idea of the priceless gift they were receiving.

His own Heart Lama, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche (1901-1981), one of the greatest Buddhist masters of the last millennium, spent much of his life creating this perfect transcript of the words of his Heart Lama, Pabongka Rinpoche; and risked his life escaping from Tibet as a penniless refugee to bring these teachings to the West.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

In hearing of these Lama's lives, we come to treasure our own immediate Heart Lama, and naturally make a resolve to become as exemplary as those who came before us, to the next generation.]

3) In the story of Lord Atisha himself, and in that of the Tibetan King named Hla Lama Yeshe U, we read of lives being risked and lost in the search of the Dharma. What message is this meant to give us in our own quest?

[A sea voyage of over a year from India to Indonesia, one thousand years ago in ancient ships that were no more really than stacks of logs tied together, was almost certain death. And Lord Atisha, who had already received extensive instruction in the Wish for enlightenment, was glad to risk it for the sake of his own and others' enlightenment. Hla Lama Yeshe U then did in fact give up his life to help get Lord Atisha to come to Tibet.

As many of these figures note in their own words, a life spent without the Dharma is worse than a death incurred seeking the Dharma. Without very extensive training in the Dharma, we are doomed anyway to a life of constant problems and personal disasters, ending in a certain and lonely death.

If we can use our time on this earth in pursuit of some teaching which can take us and all others beyond death itself, then certainly this is worth risking our life—or less gloriously but more importantly, working steadily at these teachings for the entire course of our life. Given that we will care the seeds on with us into the infinite future, it is never too late to try—it is all we have to do.]

4) Pabongka Rinpoche spends quite some time discussing the outer appearance that Lord Atisha and his disciples maintained both during their voyage to the Isle of Gold and after their arrival. He relates this to one of the direct followers of Lord Buddha, a monk named Ashvajit. Explain, and comment on the unexpected ways in which this teaching might apply to ourselves in our own attempt to attract others to the spiritual path.

[Pabongka Rinpoche notes that—during the entire 13 months of his voyage to the Golden Isle—Lord Atisha never once changed into lay clothes,

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

although certainly it may have been more convenient, and safe, to do so on many parts of the journey. The Rinpoche uses this opportunity to exhort the Tibetan monks to whom he is speaking to make a better effort to maintain an outer appearance which is inspiring to the other people around them—an appearance which attracts them to the Dharma.

He mentions here how a direct disciple of the Buddha, Master Ashvajit, maintained such a peaceful and disciplined outer appearance that this alone attracted the famed disciple Shariputra (one of the heroes of the Heart Sutra) to the teachings, and led directly to his perceiving emptiness directly. We see a similar reference to Master Ashvajit’s peaceful demeanor in a scriptural account of the famed woman disciple of Lord Buddha, Sumaghada. And the Rinpoche wants us to do the same in our own lives.

That is, as teachers or role models for others, we need to think of what outer appearance would most attract others to the life-saving medicine of the teachings. In some cases, this might involve trying to look the traditional part of a Lama, in white or crimson robes—if we perceive that this would be more intriguing to our audience, or lend us more credibility.

In the world as it stands now, we need to keep our sights on the purpose for this outer appearance: attracting those who might learn from us, making an impression of authenticity. This goal is best served by the “chameleon effect”: by assuming whatever outer appearance might best serve others at any particular moment.

This might then involve looking more like a businessperson, for a business audience; or like a yoga teacher for a talk in a yoga center; or a “hipper” look for a younger audience at a musical event. Our own personal preference might be to wear something comfortable and light, but we need to think of what will be attractive to others, and bring them into our sphere so that we can begin the process of introducing them to the Dharma.

This also of course applies to our personal demeanor, as in the case of Master Ashvajit. We can’t expect others to be attracted to the practices we are following if we are constantly nervous or frowning or arguing with others. We need to constantly think of appearing in a way which attracts others, and perhaps even helps them overcome the lower motivations they might have had for being attracted in the first place: note that the sage

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

Ashvajit's name can be translated as "the one who tames (*jit*) the wild horses (*ashva*)!"

The ultimate example here might be the tantric Angel named Vajra Yogini ("Angel of Diamond") who actually assumes a sensual appearance in order to "attract those who are crazed by desire." Sort of a spiritual Venus Flytrap.]

5) What is the first thing that Lord Atisha and his disciples did upon landing on the Golden Island after their harrowing 13-month journey across the sea? How does this relate to our own spiritual practice?

[Upon landing on the Golden Isle, Lord Atisha and his disciples devote several weeks to resting and, very importantly, spending a lot of time with some of Lama Serlingpa's disciples, grilling them and others carefully about their teacher, to confirm that this is someone that they really want to entrust themselves to for their spiritual training.

The implication here is sort of mind-boggling: that someone who had repeatedly risked their life to make a year's journey to attend a certain teacher's classes might turn back without attending the teaching if they discovered that there were some personal flaw or past incident in the teacher's life that they felt compromised this teacher's integrity or knowledge.

As Pabongka Rinpoche himself notes, most of us wouldn't even think of checking into the teacher's life, especially if they were already well-known. Perhaps it's the fact that, if we really demanded perfection of a teacher, then (as some scriptural sources also point out) we might never find a teacher.

We have also heard that we should be slow to judge a teacher, since any faults that we see are coming, in the end, from us. But this relates primarily to the personal and often tumultuous magic that asserts itself after we have already made our commitment to a personal Lama—at which time they begin to push and test us.

Before making this commitment, we need to move slow and, as the original wording of *The Gift* puts it, conduct a "private investigation" into our

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

potential teacher's life and viewpoints. Indeed, the karma of caring to investigate—in a respectful and open way—is that we *would* come to meet a teacher of highest integrity and knowledge.]

6) What gift did Lord Atisha present to Lama Serlingpa upon their first meeting; what does it signify, and how might it relate to our interaction with our own teacher?

[Upon finally meeting Lama Serlingpa, Lord Atisha offers him a crystal vase which is absolutely clear, so that the contents can be seen from the outside. The vase is filled with gold, silver, pearls, coral, and lapis. The gift has been selected very carefully, first of all to indicate that Lord Atisha knows that the teachings he is requesting on the Wish for enlightenment are infinitely precious.

But more importantly, he is indicating to his Lama that he intends to receive these instructions properly: that he will be a clear and clean vessel, receiving the full transmission without prejudice or preconception, without sullyng the instructions as he passes them on to his own disciples. And he seeks to be full, as the vase that he offers is full.

We can recall here that a good disciple avoids the “three problems of the pot”: acting like a pot which is turned over, and unwilling to accept all the teachings fully; like a dirty pot, infecting the teaching with ones own imperfect ideas; and like a pot with a hole in the bottom, unable to retain what is taught. The scene with the Lama of the Golden Isle also recalls other stories of disciples meeting their teachers, and either offering an empty vessel (which can be a good or bad omen), or struggling to accept a vessel filled, for example, with alcohol from their Teacher.

For us in modern times, the lessons here are to express in our behavior how precious the Dharma is as we request it from a teacher: for example, be on time to class; offer substantial help in getting the class arranged; listen respectfully; learn well; practice well, and pass it on well to the next pure vessel.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

7) For how many years did Lord Atisha remain at the feet of Lama Serlingpa, in order to learn from him? What event brought these studies to a close, and how does it apply to ourselves?

[Lord Atisha studied at the feet of Lama Serlingpa for some 12 years, receiving complete instructions on both the worldview of emptiness and the heart of compassion. His Lama then said to him, “O Magnificent One, you shouldn’t stay here; you must go now to the north; take yourself to the Land of Snows, to the north.” He thus predicted Lord Atisha’s service in Tibet.

The lesson for us here is that there is a point when our main training is finished, and it is time for us as well to move on to the service of others. It is a wide world, with many in need of the nectar of the Dharma, and the day comes when we must go forth to teach them ourselves, to the best of our ability.]

8) Why was the Tibetan king Hla Lama Yeshe U so desperate to convince Lord Atisha to come and teach in Tibet? What are three ways in which his labor to do so reflects our own current situation?

[Some passage of Buddhist teachings from the Indian homeland to Tibet had begun as early as the 5th century. During the next 500 years though a wide variety of teachers from India showed up among these previously uneducated yak-herders, and a good number of them seem to have taken advantage of the Tibetans’ lack of knowledge and generous nature. The practice and transmission of the tantric teachings in particular was often it seems carried on in irresponsible and unclean ways.

The Tibetan king, Hla Lama Yeshe U, was desperate to repair this situation by inviting a true master—one who was highly qualified in both the open and secret teachings—to Tibet. He felt that it was his responsibility to his people to bring such a master, and he sacrificed his life to do so.

In many ways, we are in a similar situation nowadays. There are many places in the world where sincere people are seeking an authentic spiritual path. And so first we must take upon ourselves the responsibility to see that their needs are met—that qualified teachers and authentic teachings are made readily available to them. Part of this responsibility is to make

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Seven

sure that teachers without sufficient qualification are not sent to such people until they are truly ready.

Secondly we must be very sure that—in cases where we ourselves are involved in the teaching people with spiritual aspirations—we have made persistent and serious efforts, like Lord Atisha, in training ourselves properly for the task. We have access to the 18 ACI courses and to the 18 Diamond Way courses, and it is very necessary that we make the effort to go through all of these courses (along with formally completing the homeworks, quizzes, and exams, regardless of how well we think we may have absorbed their content otherwise).

Thirdly we need to take a lesson from the way in which these early teachers abused the trust of those seeking a spiritual path. We must be extremely careful not to mix up our service and teaching of these people with our own need for attention and money. We must be very pure in our own behavior and in how we interact with these fresh, hopeful students.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, contemplating the three points outlined above in question #8, and how they apply to you personally. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Eight: Helpers in Disguise

1) How was Naktso Lotsawa selected as the person who would go to India to make a final attempt to bring Lord Atisha to Tibet? What qualifications did he have for this task, and what made him decide to go? How does his example apply to our own lives?

[The Tibetan King Jangchub U made prayers to the Three Jewels, and performed “mo” divinations, and Naktso Lotsawa’s name repeatedly came up as the right person to induce Lord Atisha to come. The monk did not appear to have any other special qualifications for the task; he had never travelled at all and was quite dismayed by being asked to represent the King in this vital undertaking, which would affect all of Tibet for generations to come.

It appears that the main thing which helped him make up his mind to go was simply that the King, while asking him to take on the journey, burst into tears. Naktso Lotsawa also started crying, and heard himself saying “Yes, yes, I will do it,” without realizing it.

His story sounds a lot like the novel, *The Hobbit*, and the story of our own lives. We find ourselves in present times in a unique situation—we have ourselves met with the Dharma, in a very authentic and pure lineage, and perhaps we feel that otherwise we have no special qualification or expectation that we should be playing an historical role in the evolution of our planet.

It seems though that we are meant to take a lesson from Naktso Lotsawa. He had a simple desire to help the people of Tibet, and he just went at it day to day, step by step working his way to India, following the currents of his

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Eight

life and doing the best to reach his goal, despite many obstacles and hardships.

And yet he changed the history of our world—in a very real way, he is responsible for our meeting the Dharma as well. If we just continue with our study and practice, steadily, modestly, then we will indeed become qualified to help the many people in the world who need a true spiritual path, and thus make our own mark upon the evolution of this planet into an enlightened mandala.]

2) What strange event happened as Naktso Lotsawa and his travelling party approached the fortress of the capital of Nepal? And what lesson does it contain for our own life?

[As Naktso Lotsawa and his companions approached the fortress of the capital of Nepal, they were met by a lone traveller on the road who said to them,

You look as though you are making a journey to a faraway land for some great purpose. I suggest that, while you are on the road, you repeat to yourself the following words, over and over: “I bow down to the Three Jewels. May the holy Dharma, which is the source of all the Enlightened Beings of the past and present and future, come to flourish in the Land of Snows.” Do so, and the goal of your journey shall be accomplished, without any great problems along the way.

The party asks him who he is, but the man says simply, “You will find out in good time.” We learn that he was an emanation of Dromtun Je, the magical layman who facilitated all of Lord Atisha’s work in Tibet. During the entire trip, and especially in the tense days at Vikramalashila Monastery as they attempt to convince Lord Atisha to come, this mysterious figure reappears, as an old man, as a nomad, as a young boy.

We’ve already decided that we are all the lowly hobbit who is going to play a starring role in saving the world, just like Naktso Lotsawa. It’s natural then that divine beings are going to emanate from time to time around us at

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Eight

critical moments, guiding us and pulling off those small miracles without which we could never succeed.

We can start looking out for these Angels now, enjoying sort of a reverse paranoia, where we begin to believe that we are surrounded by people who are not what they seem, trying to shepherd us to enlightenment.]

3) Naktso Lotsawa and friends reach the gates of Vikramalashila at night, after they have been closed and locked against intruders, not to be opened until morning. A Tibetan sticks his head out of a small window in the wall and tells them to come back in the morning but to leave their gold (about \$4 million dollars of gold apparently, by today's standards) in a little nook in the wall, and not to worry about it. Unquestioning they follow his advice. What is the lesson here for us?

[Naktso Lotsawa and team are obviously being taken care of by beings who are way beyond their understanding, and they seem to be aware of it. They have been practicing well, and have taken upon themselves a very major project to help all living beings; this is creating karmic seeds all along their journey to run into (or more precisely, to create) these holy beings.

Something within them tells them to trust these beings, and herein is a lesson for us. In our journey to perfect our own understanding, and thus become someone who can be of real help to others, we learn to trust, implicitly, the divine forces and beings that seem to show up in our life to guide us.

It's important to realize that this instinct to trust the divine is one more source of karmic seeds: the more we trust, the more we leave ourselves completely and unreasonably vulnerable to those who strike us as holy beings, then the more seeds we plant to live in their world, and to help create their world from this one.]

4) Gya Tsundru Sengge, a Tibetan monk who has been staying near Lord Atisha for some time trying to induce him to come to India, greets Naktso Lotsawa and his companions and gives them advice on how to approach the head of the monastery, whose name is Master Ratnakara, in order to make

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Eight

their request about inviting the Lord. What can we learn about our relationship with our own Teacher from this exchange?

[What might be termed “Lama Etiquette” is the first and greatest subject of all the steps of the path to enlightenment. There is a constant admonition throughout all the levels of the spiritual path that we should never trouble or upset our Lama’s heart. Almost all the advice that Naktso Lotsawa receives at this point is aimed at assuring that he does not accidentally cause any problem or concern for the Lama.

Those who have had the honor of serving a high Lama closely understand this idea of timing: normally, the demands upon any major teacher are extensive—as Lord Atisha puts it, “I hold many keys,” meaning that over the years every major teacher accumulates more and more responsibilities in serving the needs of others. This means that the disciple or attendant has to learn carefully the art of judging when it’s the right time to approach the Lama with a question or issue that they believe requires their attention.

Briefly put, the highest form of spiritual practice—meaning, of course, the form of spiritual practice which best serves the needs of every living being—is to find (create) our Heart Teacher, and then assist them in their holy mission. We do our best to learn how to render this assistance transparently, with as little wear and tear, with as little concern, on the Lama’s part. We want them to stay in our world indefinitely, and so we plant the seeds for this by doing our best to help see that their day runs as smoothly as possible.]

5) Holy beings like the Angel of Compassion (Avalokiteshvara), and the Lady of Liberation (Tara), appear to Lord Atisha and encourage him to come to Tibet to help spread the Dharma there. They warn him though that there will be a negative consequence to the mission. Describe this consequence, and explain how it also applies to ourselves in modern times.

[These holy beings inform Lord Atisha that—if he does decide to go to help the Tibetans—then this will shorten his life by some twenty years: if he stays in India, he will live to the age of 92; and if he travels to Tibet he will pass away at the age of 73. And although there is some uncertainty about

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Eight

his dates, we often see reported in the traditional sources 982-1054; which comes to 73 by Tibetan reckoning.

Of course Lord Atisha did decide to go, knowing very clearly that this would cost him 20 years of his life. As our text itself says, “The Lord then thought to himself, ‘If I can be of some help to the Tibetans and it shortens my life, then so be it.’ Great courage rose in his heart, and he decided not to worry about how long he was going to live.”

This situation applies equally to ourselves, every hour of the day. We are constantly confronted with the decision of how much time we will give to our practice of the Dharma, and how much time we will sacrifice tending to the needs of others.

The lesson that we learn from Lord Atisha here is that we can rest assured that the best thing we can do is to give our time, and give as much of our time as we possibly can—that the very purpose of a human life is to offer our time, our life, to others. And this begins with that extra half hour spent sweeping the Dharma center after a program has ended and everyone else has gone home.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, a contemplation in which we try to identify two people with whom we interacted either today or yesterday, and who may have been Dromtun Je or some other holy being, trying to direct us in some surprising way further along our path. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Nine:
Stop Making Decisions

1) What issue about the relationship between the open and secret teachings did Lord Atisha face when he reached Tibet? How is this issue resolved?

[As the Tibetan king Jangchub U explained to Lord Atisha when he first arrived in Tibet, there was an issue raging about the relationship between the open and secret teachings of Buddhism: some people were practicing only the rules for monks, and claimed that the secret teachings were improper; while others were practicing only the secret teachings, and said that the monk's vows were unneeded.

Lord Atisha clarified of course that the secret teachings—where we practice to meet angelic beings, and then transform our bodies to become like them—can only work for us if we possess the necessary karmic seeds; and these seeds are planted largely through the practices of the three types of vows, including those of the ordained.

As just one example, we can consider the vital practice of a spiritual partner. For this kind of relationship to be successful, we must first plant the necessary seeds for it, by maintaining a high degree of sexual purity, carefully respecting the relationships of others. This practice is greatly enhanced if we take monastic vows to honor such relationships.]

2) It is said that one of the main reasons that Lord Atisha wrote his historic first lam-rim text, the *Light on the Path to Enlightenment*, is that he was pleased by the questions that he was asked by the Tibetan king upon their first meeting—questions that the text was designed to address. What are five of

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

these questions which Pabongka Rinpoche mentions in his text, and how are they briefly answered?

[Here are the five questions, and concise answers:

(1) Is it necessary for a person to possess vows of individual freedom (*pratimoksha* vows) in order to commit to the Wish for enlightenment in the form of a wish, and to take the vows to act out this Wish?

It is necessary to make at least a lifetime commitment to keep the ten foundation vows (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, etc) as a basis for the vows of the bodhisattva. It is not necessary however to commit to monk's or nun's vows in order to take bodhisattva vows, or to have lifetime layperson's vows.

(2) Is it possible to reach enlightenment only with an understanding of emptiness, or only with compassion, without having both of these together?

This is not possible. The famous scriptural example is that a bird cannot fly with only a single wing; we must understand where things are really coming from, and we must want to save the world, in order to become enlightened.

(3) Are we permitted to teach someone the secret teachings without their having received empowerment first?

Normally this is not allowed, because the empowerment is a personal blessing carried through the lineage of the centuries which allows the teachings to do their magic. In exceptional cases, where a Lama feels that a student may have extraordinary potential (as happened in fact between Lord Atisha and his Tibetan disciple Dromtun Je), secret teachings can be granted spontaneously "in order to plant an unstoppable seed."

(4) Are we allowed to grant the actual form of the wisdom initiation to a person who is keeping celibacy?

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

The details of this initiation are of course secret, but they involve close physical contact that might otherwise be inappropriate for an ordained person. Since however such contact is transformed during this ceremony (much in the way that the wine in a Christian mass is transformed into the blood of Jesus), it is perfectly appropriate for an ordained person.

(5) Is one allowed to perform the various rites of the secret way without having received empowerment as a Diamond Master?

There is a formal empowerment of this kind, during a set ritual; but even its essence is that our own Diamond Master of the secret teachings has decided that we are fit to teach the secret way and perform its rites. Anything can be done with our Diamond Master's permission, and nothing should be done without it.]

3) Pabongka Rinpoche mentions, in passing, that his own precious Teacher (whose name was Dakpo Jampel Hlundrup) said that the Tibetan king Jangchub U had displeased Lord Atisha about one thing during their first meeting. What did the King do that was wrong, and what implications does it have for our own lives?

[On their first meeting, before the Tibetan king could have had time to properly evaluate Lord Atisha's qualifications personally—and before Lord Atisha could have had time to establish the King's readiness—the King asked the Lord for tantric initiations and permissions.

This would create a spiritual bond which is extremely serious and lasts for all our future lifetimes—a bond which neither teacher nor disciple can ever thereafter dissolve or ignore. It's extremely inappropriate to make this bond lightly, with someone that we haven't known deeply for a very long time.

Of course the lesson for us here is not to enter a teacher/disciple relationship, and most especially a tantric one, without much serious thought, and knowledge of the teacher or student.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

4) Pabongka Rinpoche next explains how Lord Atisha and his principal Tibetan disciple, Dromtun Je, first met each other. What do we learn for our own personal practice from Dromtun Je's attitude about the timing of this meeting and the gift that he made on that first day? And what was missing from the offering that Lord Atisha received that same day?

[Dromtun Je arrives at the place where Lord Atisha is staying, in order to request teachings and meet this great being. The attendants there tell him that Lord Atisha has gone out to a sponsor's house and will be back shortly; he may wait there for the Lama.

Dromtun Je tells them that if a person ever has a chance to lay eyes on their Lama even a second earlier then they should try to do so; he takes off to try to find the sponsor's house, and actually encounters the Lord for the first time in the middle of the street. He throws himself on the ground in a full-length prostration, and the Teacher comes to place his hands on his head and recite an extended blessing in Sanskrit.

At the sponsor's house that day, Lord Atisha requests an extra portion of the traditional sponsor's offering of food, for his new disciple. Pabongka Rinpoche notes that this offering did *not* include meat, since "Lord Atisha never ate meat." This was very unusual, since most Tibetan monks have always eaten meat over the years. (It is said in defense of this that a monk must accept and eat whatever a layperson puts in their bowl as the monks go daily begging for food; but in later times became the habit when monks purchased their own food in large quantities for the massive Tibetan monasteries. In the past few years, under pressure from local Indians and foreign visitors, some Tibetan monasteries resettled in India have banned meat for the communal meals.)

The food offering included both butter and roasted barley flour. Dromtun Je ate the flour, but took the butter and made a small butter lamp, which he placed that night next to his Teacher's pillow. He continued to offer a butter lamp beside his Lama's pillow every night for the many years that they were together.]

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

5) How, according to Pabongka Rinpoche, was a newly written commentary evaluated in ancient India? What implications are there here for our own efforts to spread the Dharma?

[Pabongka Rinpoche states that Lord Atisha's *Lamp on the Path* was subjected to the same scrutiny as any other newly composed commentary in ancient India. First a meeting of the sages was called, and the pages of the new book were handed out to them, one by one, to be examined.

The sages would report to the King if they found that there was no problem in either the wording or the meaning of the book. The King would then present a reward to the author, and a proclamation would be made that this was a useful book.

If on the other hand it were found that—although the work was written in beautiful wording—its meaning were mistaken in some way, then the manuscript would be tied to the tail of a dog let loose into the streets. The King would also issue a declaration that the book was unfit to be read, and the author would be disgraced.

The same scrutiny should be applied to any materials that we produce for sharing the teachings with people. As far as content, they should be highly accurate; directly based on authentic teachings of our lineage; appropriate for the intended audience; and presented in a logical sequence. As for form, these materials should be physically attractive; grammatically correct; and exhibit careful attention to correct formatting and spelling (especially of foreign words).

If the Dharma really can save everyone in the world, then it deserves no less.]

6) What event decided the question of whether Lord Atisha would remain in Tibet to instruct these difficult yak-herders? How does this apply to the idea that we should stop making decisions?

[Naktso Lotsawa and the other Tibetans had made a solemn vow to the elder of Nalendra Monastery, Master Ratnakara, that they would be sure that Lord Atisha returned to India after 3 years in Tibet. And so as his third

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

year in their country drew to an end, they sent out with a party through Nepal to return the Master.

Here though the entire way was blocked by a major war taking place. Dromtun Je was delighted, and advocated turning back to Tibet; Naktso Lotsawa, who had made the promise, felt conflicted—until Lord Atisha himself said that it wasn't his fault that there was a war, and they could all in good conscience make their way back to Tibet. In the end (although there is some disagreement about the exact count), the Lord remained in Tibet for 19 years.

Pabongka Rinpoche makes the remark that the obstacle which prevented Lord Atisha's return to India was a result of good karmic seeds planted by the people of Tibet. Which brings us to not making decisions.

Naktso Lotsawa especially spent a lot of time worrying about whether he should push on to get Lord Atisha back to India, and how to get the authorities at the Lord's home monastery to agree to his staying in Tibet. He was caught up in making decisions.

A lot of times in our lives, things happen—"just" happen—without our having to make decisions. Many people for example, if you ask them where they met their partner, will say it was just by accident: they went to a party or a movie, and they bumped into that special person. There was no difficult decision involved, it "just" happened.

This is how we want all the good things in our life to happen. And we can make them happen, if we simply learn how to plant seeds in the mind, and how to get them to ripen quickly and strongly. We can be conflicted about which way to go on a road in 11th century Nepal, or we can be worried about whether we should wear red lipstick or pink lipstick to find the man of our dreams.

But if in the first case we just show some sincere concern for the hopes of others who need a teacher (which Naktso Lotsawa did)—and in the second case we just spend some time helping a person who is lonely—then a war will "just" happen and force the Teacher back to our homeland; or the partner of a lifetime will "just" show up for dinner at our parents' house.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

Just plant the seeds, sit back, and relax. What you want will come, no matter what you do. Decisions become a thing of the past.]

7) Why, surprisingly, did the great sages of India find Lord Atisha's lam-rim so refreshing? What are the implications for ourselves, as the people who will be passing these teachings on to others?

[Obviously it would be expected that the great sages of India, who considered Lord Atisha almost like a national treasure, might be upset that he was unable to return to India. The Tibetans though sent a copy of the tiny lam-rim text he had composed for them—the *Light on the Path to Enlightenment*—down to his monastery in India.

The sages of Vikramalashila—accustomed as they were to massive, technical treatises on the Buddhist path—were delighted by this jewel, marveling in its simplicity, and the fact that Lord Atisha had managed to capture in it the entire Buddhist path, all the way up to enlightenment. As Pabongka Rinpoche puts it, “They realized that the stupidity and laziness of the Tibetans had made this masterpiece of simplicity possible,” and they decided that the whole fiasco of the Lord's trip to Tibet had been worth this one small treasure.

Perhaps sometimes we are in the position of these Indian masters—a little overwhelmed sometimes by the vast amount of spiritual information we have been processing—and welcome a “break” where we can concentrate on something simple and powerful. Perhaps sometimes our own disciples are in need of the same kind of break!]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, a contemplation on one or two difficult decisions that face you right now, and what kind of seed you might need to plant in order for the decision to just be made for you automatically, and perfectly. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Ten: Tears in a Meadow

1) What event happened between Lord Atisha and Dromtun Je which reveals the value which Lord Atisha himself put upon his brief lam-rim text? What lesson is there here for us?

[Lord Atisha one day granted the instructions upon his brief lam-rim, the *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment*, to his close disciple Dromtun Je. The student was a little miffed, since he had already seen the Lord pass on high tantric instructions to others in their group, and all he got was this little open text.

And so Dromtun Je asks Lord Atisha why he has chosen to grant this instruction to him. And the Lord replies, “You are the only person I could find who was worthy of it!”

How does this apply to us? Remember that Dromtun Je was not someone who, at first, one might think was the best person to whom to grant ones most valuable teaching. He was after all a layperson (although one with lifetime lay vows): one of the few major figures in the history of the Dharma in Tibet who was never ordained.

And he was more of a facilitator, making sure that yaks to ride and barley flour to eat where there at the right place, at the right time—he took care to assure that all of Lord Atisha’s material needs were met. (Although again, in time, he was to write some of the most important records of Lord Atisha’s time in Tibet.)

The point is that we aren’t granted the highest of teachings by demanding them, by seeking them, or even by being intellectually ready for them. We must plant the seeds to have them *granted* to us, and there are no more

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

powerful seeds than serving our Heart Lama and their mission—which is exactly what Dromtun Je spent his entire life doing.]

2) What does Pabongka Rinpoche find particularly amazing about how Je Tsongkapa himself describes the passage of the lam-rim teachings through the lineage? What lesson is there here for us?

[Pabongka Rinpoche devotes some time to relating how the biographies of Je Tsongkapa written by his close disciples describe the way in which Je Tsongkapa was granted instruction into the lam-rim, the steps of the path, by none other than Manjushri himself: by the Angel of Wisdom.

And he remarks then that we could trace our lineage of the lam-rim back not to Lord Buddha or to Lord Atisha, as we have been doing, but simply back to Je Tsongkapa, as he received these teachings from Manjushri.

Pabongka Rinpoche then expresses amazement at how Je Tsongkapa chose to keep these personal encounters largely secret, and chose to trace, for his own students, the lam-rim teachings back through Lord Atisha to the Buddha.

For us this is a lesson in humility, in not revealing our own special spiritual experiences lightly—doing so only when we know that it would be of very great benefit.]

3) What did Manjushri, the Angel of Wisdom, find so humorous about Je Tsongkapa's completing a major section of one of the greatest books ever written in the Tibetan language? What does Pabongka Rinpoche encourage us to do at this point in our own teaching of the lam-rim, and how could this be facilitated in our times?

[Earlier on in his lifetime, Je Tsongkapa was granted his own training, in the extraordinarily concise practice of the three principal paths, by none other than Manjushri himself.

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

Later, when Je Tsongkapa had completed writing a large part of his masterpiece, *The Great Book on the Steps of the Path*, he proudly showed his work to Manjushri, who was acting as his divine Heart Lama.

The enlightened Angel laughed, and challenged Je Tsongkapa to say whether there was a single point in all these hundreds of pages that Manjushri hadn't already covered when he taught Je Tsongkapa the three principal paths.

And of course Je Rinpoche was left speechless. We are fortunate that we have received this same instruction on the three principal paths as it was passed down from Je Tsongkapa himself; the famous root text is in fact the subject of the entire first course of the 18 Asian Classics Institute courses.

When we ourselves reach this point in teaching the lam-rim to someone—that is, when we are describing the greatness of those beings who are the source of the lam-rim teachings, and come to Je Tsongkapa's own role in the lineage—then we are encouraged by Pabongka Rinpoche to go into some greater detail upon the major points of Je Tsongkapa's life.

This can be easily done, in cases where there is sufficient time, by utilizing the book *King of the Dharma, the Illustrated Life of Je Tsongkapa, Teacher of the First Dalai Lama*, published by our own group. It includes a major original Tibetan biography, along with ancient paintings of the Master's life, and sections which relate his life to our own. Very appropriate and easily used to help our own students to appreciate the life of one of the greatest spiritual figures of all human history.]

4) After discussing Je Tsongkapa's role in the transmission of the lam-rim teachings in Tibet, Pabongka Rinpoche turns to how various lineages began to form from this point on. He devotes some time to the lineage of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama's *Word of Gentle Voice*, describing two distinct flows of transmission—one called the "Southern Lineage," and another known as the "Central Lineage." What are three differences between the two that he mentions at this point, and why is it important that they are included in our text?

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

[As we are soon to learn, there are important details offered by Pabongka Rinpoche on how to meditate upon the lam-rim. During these meditations, we will be (1) picturing the holy beings and objects to whom we go for refuge; we will be (2) visualizing a mass of holy beings in order to accumulate good karma with them; and we will be (3) making a very special offering of a crystal bathing house. The fine points of these and other vital lam-rim practices differ between the two lineages.

As Pabongka Rinpoche notes, the Southern Lineage of the Great Fifth's masterwork came very close to being lost, and we are fortunate that we have his account of both lineages, as he received them himself through direct transmission.]

5) Pabongka Rinpoche includes in his description of the Tibetan lineages of the lam-rim a number of anecdotes about the great teachers of these lineages, so we can gain some appreciation of what kind of people they were. What are two misconceptions that might come up about two of these sages—one with some firewood, and the other with a great boulder?

[One of the sages of the Southern Lineage was Dakdra Kenchen Tenpa Gyatso. Pabongka Rinpoche notes that he “gained an insight into the Middle Way while chopping some firewood.”

We sometimes see accounts like this in scripture, where someone is said to have a special insight into emptiness—what might sometimes be called a kind of “satori” or peak experience—while undertaking an everyday activity such as chopping firewood.

It is important to understand though that these accounts cannot be describing the direct perception of emptiness, which is the one peak experience in our spiritual life which is absolutely necessary if we are to remove our own and other's suffering, and become an enlightened being. This particular experience *cannot* be had unless one is in a deep state of meditation, with the body sitting and completely still, the mind in an extraordinarily focused state relating to the form realm.

Any special “insight into emptiness” that we have then chopping wood or doing something like this would most likely relate to the path of

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

preparation, where a well-trained person enjoys intellectual insights into emptiness in preparation for the direct version.

We also hear from the Rinpoche the story of Seto Lama Kelnden, another teacher of the Southern Lineage. Disciples and sponsors made him generous gifts of things like gold coins and bolts of silken cloth. He accepted them gracefully and then went out to a place where a huge boulder was split down the middle. There he threw all the offerings, and long after his death people found them, happily keeping the coins and others things that had not already rotted away.

He could have passed these offerings on to friends and students, and it might seem first of all that by throwing unwanted gifts away where no one would see them he was honoring a bodhisattva vow, about the need for teachers and other practitioners to accept gifts of money and similar articles from others without objection, in order to make them happy—even if we don't want the things being offered.

We learn though from the Rinpoche that Lama Kelnden was actually worried that he would get a big head if he kept all the gifts—he was afraid would begin to think that he was some kind of Major Lama. He knew of this danger and did what he could to prevent it, as we should as well.]

6) What story of the Southern Lineage do we hear taking place in a meadow, and how might it relate to us?

[One of the Lamas of the Southern Lineage was named Gelong Janchub Tokme. He lived in a hermitage in the mountains, and during the day he would go down to a nearby meadow to make the offering of a tormo cake, to help the sad spirits of that place.

During his daily visit to the meadow he would take some time to sit down and meditate upon the steps of the path. And every time he got to the sections on compassion and the Wish for enlightenment, he would begin to weep uncontrollably.

A boy who herded sheep near the meadow came across him one day and thought to himself how strange it was that a single old man would sit crying

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

to himself. The boy was intrigued, and returned every day to watch the scene played out again and again.

Pabongka Rinpoche takes some trouble to point out that, of all the great teachers of the Southern Lineage, Gelong Janchub Tokme was no high geshe or incarnate Lama—just “a simple monk.” But the Rinpoche offers him an important place in his account of the lineage because he had actually put the steps into practice for transforming his own heart, rather than just studying these steps.

And of course if we were to reach a point where the teaching could move us to tears, then this would be a great blessing, and real understanding.]

7) Why did we almost lose the oral transmission of the great lam-rim teaching known as *The Quick Path*, written by His Holiness the Second Panchen Lama, Lobsang Yeshe (1663-1737), almost as a commentary upon the famed *Path of Bliss* from His Holiness the First Panchen Lama?

[Incredibly, no one thought to request this Lama for the oral transmission. There was a yogi named Lobsang Namgyal who was staying in a hermitage in retreat not far away; he perceived, in his meditation, that this oral transmission was about to never happen, as His Holiness was already quite old at the time. Luckily he was extremely persistent, and was able after much trouble to approach the Lama personally and receive the transmission.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, a meditation of gratitude for the kindness and hardships of those Lamas

A Gift of Liberation
Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

of the lam-rim lineage whose stories you recall—along with a few moments of determination to become one of these Lamas of the Lineage yourself. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations: